

David Weinreb has been working at Elm City Montessori since 2020 and is a magnet resource teacher. Part of his responsibilities includes organizing family life and family partnerships and managing tech projects for the school. Weinreb calls himself a “coach of teachers” and says he helped found the Green Team, which was organized last year after the school applied for a grant with Common Ground High School. According to Weinreb, the Green Team helps “invest in stewarding the land around our school” and is a collection of people who are interested in planting seeds in classrooms, building garden beds, sound stages, and putting up outdoor classrooms, which helps teachers and families think through what environmental education looks like in school.

Like Booker T. Washington Academy, Elm City Montessori does not follow the same standard curriculum as the rest of the New Haven public k-12 schools. Elm City Montessori is a charter of New Haven Public Schools. “We care about common core state standards to a degree, but we also have a Montessori aligned curriculum that anchors us,” says Weinreb.

Elm City Montessori starts at pre-k to grade 3 and Weinreb says incorporating environmental education into the classroom at such a young age is essential. “I think there’s a lot of importance in introducing and connecting children and the wilderness, children and green space, children and neighborhood and nature, from the beginning,” he says.

Children can find solace in nature if they’re exposed to it at an early age. “There’s endless artistry, creation, and imagination that can happen in the woods,” says Weinreb. “There’s a lot of caretaking and stewardship that you get to teach through stuff that’s green.”

Elm City Montessori is doing its part to ensure that students have a chance to be in these green spaces. In the middle of February, Elm City Montessori set up an outdoor classroom with

benches to establish a new space for the pre-k and kindergarten students. Additionally, Weinreb says the school is launching a seventh-grade program that is land-based. “Our seventh grade exists for the first time this year. They are raising chickens for the first time this past year.”

Weinreb says there’s also a full-time environmental educator, Gammy Moses, at the school. “Our students spend time outdoors and have an outdoor curriculum that Gammy is creating,” he says. “There are several classrooms that have seeds and have animals and help teach children how to grow stuff. There are classrooms that are doing the farm work, helping to care for the beds that are outside.”

Prior to working at Elm City Montessori, Weinreb worked at Fair Haven School for four years. In 2016, he was involved on a project to develop a schoolyard habitat. Weinreb and his team applied for a habitat grant funded by Common Ground School. “We applied, got it and with that, we had several thousand dollars to play with to plant native plants, but also to take over a space that was formerly grass,” says Weinreb. With the grant money, Weinreb helped install an arbor and picnic tables and reached out to the New Haven Land Trust to become a community garden. They also built nine garden beds and began utilizing a greenhouse to grow seeds. “We got a lot of families involved, both with the initiation and the caretaking of the space over time,” says Weinreb.

This project allowed students to strengthen their connection to their community and their school. Weinreb says his class was especially involved in the project. “My students were all Spanish-speaking newcomers,” says Weinreb. “A lot of them had come from places where they lived rurally, where they had connections to plants and farming techniques and came with a lot of expertise. I think sometimes there’s a trope that urban children don’t like green spaces and plants and dirt, but that was absolutely not the experience of my children.”

Unfortunately, one of the challenges of this project was keeping it going. Weinreb says that once he left the school, many of his colleagues involved on the project left as well. “Some of these green spaces can take care of themselves, and some of them can’t. It’s not currently being cared for,” says Weinreb.

“Some things that are hard are that we’re not at school over the summer when things grow the most, the weather can make things hard or interesting, but it’s always there. We also need people to be hands-on in order for these projects to work. I don’t think the core challenges come from students’ lack of interest.”

In the classroom, Weinreb acknowledges that because environmental education is so broad and has so many in-depth topics, “the goal isn’t coverage, not touching every topic,” he says. “ I’d say that goals are ‘can we inspire curiosity and help students to engage in experimentation?’ ‘Are students feeling safer and more comfortable in nature over time?’ I think that’s especially important for black and brown students and students who have been made to feel that nature is not for them and not their territory.”